

Stuck but Not Immobile. Waiting, (Im)Mobility and Agency of Refugees and Asylum Seekers Along the Balkan Routes

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Abstract

The Balkan route, or rather, the Balkan routes, which in recent years have been crossed by many different people, represent a paradigmatic territory on which practices of control, subjugation and precarisation are experimented to the detriment of those in transit. Their lives are punctuated by dynamics and structures that create a constant tension between mobility and immobility, between acceleration and waiting, with obvious and different consequences on trajectories, migration projects and agency. Greece and the Balkan countries represent two emblematic cases of what certain policies of control and closure can produce, both at a structural and individual level. Starting from a fieldwork carried out in Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina from August to November 2021, this paper will try to analyze how forced waiting and immobility, imposed by the border regime and by asylum and reception systems, can in fact produce illegality (De Genova, 2004), uncertainty (Griffiths, 2013) and precariousness (Khosravi, 2017). Thanks to the collection of testimonies and stories related to the condition of people stranded in these countries, I will show how the hypermobility produced by these dynamics can also represent a tactic, an attempt to regain control over one's migratory trajectories and to put an end to temporal and geographical stuckedness.

Keywords: migration, mobility, immobility, waiting, agency, time

1. Introduction

For years, the Balkan routes have been one of the main access routes to the European Union. Since the so-called “long summer of migration” (Hess & Kasperek, 2017) these territories are crossed by thousands of people trying to

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reach Europe and represent a paradigmatic place, where practices and techniques of control, selection and precarisation are experimented to the detriment of those in transit. Their lives are punctuated by dynamics and structures that create a constant tension between mobility and immobility, between acceleration and waiting, with different consequences on their trajectories, migration projects and agency. For years, in all European countries, concepts of “crisis” and “emergency” (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2016) have pervaded public and political discourse - especially with regards to the migration phenomena -, justifying the development of restrictive policies, of new border management technologies, of different measures to control the mobility of people and of new forms of exclusion, detention, confinement. In particular, the deployment of such practices has been well implemented in specific territories, especially in the ones situated at the borders of Europe. As a result, the two countries at the center of this study - Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina - have been turned into places where people who attempt to reach Europe, remain stuck and trapped, for indefinite periods of time.

With the present contribution I analyze the conditions of migrants¹, stuck in these two territories along the Balkan Routes, by looking at the border as a geographically and socially mutable space (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), aimed at controlling but that can also be seen as a generative space, site of struggle and conflicts. Critical studies on migration and borders delineate borders as “violent devices of inclusion that select and filter people and different forms of movement” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013); they conceive borders as a form of governance over the mobility of people, that goes beyond the role of marking the sovereignty of a nation-state (Papadopoulos et al., 2008). As emerges from

¹ The question concerning the terms and designations to be used in reference to people in transit or stranded along the Balkan routes is open and felt on various and different levels. Activists and volunteers I encountered in the analyzed contexts have reported and continue to report on the debates and discussions around this issue, taking a critical view of the different options used. The difficulties related to this topic actually arise because of the “mixed” conformation of the “flows” that cross these territories, made up of people with diverse and complex migratory backgrounds, all bearers of different wills, desires and agency. Fixing these variegated subjectivities in non-exhaustive recognition categories detached from reality may in fact lead to a strengthening of exclusion/inclusion paradigms and produce further instruments of selection and restriction.

The problematic nature of using one term or the other has been therefore taken into account in this contribution. An attempt has therefore been made to use these classifying terms as little as possible and, throughout this article, the expressions “migrants”, “refugees”, “asylum seekers”, and “people on the move/in transit” will be used interchangeably.

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various studies (Balibar, 2009; Brambilla et al., 2015), the European border regime, in fact, consists of a hierarchically inclusive and exclusive, porous, permeable system that selects and excludes, not only by controlling people's mobility, but also by setting up bureaucratic, administrative and temporal devices that block, slow down, prevent access to rights and constitute mechanisms of filtering and differentiation (Yuval-Davis, 2018; Gargiulo, 2017).

By looking at this complex system of control and differentiation, but also at the specific lives and conditions of people who get trapped within this oppressive structure, it emerges how the temporal dimension is deeply connected to migratory phenomena (Canning et al. 2020). Since the so-called "crisis" of 2015, in order to regain control over untamed migratory movements across the European Union, a migration management focused on temporal control has started to play an increasingly central role (Tazzioli, 2018). The temporalities put in place have been and are extremely heterogeneous: they are given by the identification procedures, by the forms of preventive exclusion from the channels to request international protection, by the indefinite waits inside the detention centers, by the very nature of the camp system, by the inherent timings of the procedures, by the deadlines and by all the bureaucratic rhythms typical of reception and asylum systems.

So, starting from these considerations and with the aim to analyze the condition of people stranded at the borders of Europe, I asked myself: What can these waitings and forced immobilities produce? What kind of strategies are implemented by people constrained by closure policies, border regimes, imposed temporalities?

Thanks to a multi-sited ethnographic research - which involved a field period from July 2021 to December 2021, in the contexts of Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina - I had the chance to witness and analyze how forced waiting and immobility, imposed by the border regime and by asylum and reception systems, can produce illegality (De Genova, 2004), uncertainty (Griffiths, 2013) and precariousness (Khosravi, 2017). But, what also emerged in these difficult situations was the possibility of developing strategies and tactics capable of opening up new interstices and spaces of possibility (Butler, 1997). Thanks to the concept of subjectivity (Butler, 1997; Pinelli, 2013), I was thus able to grasp not only the power relations and their effects, but also how people immobilized and constrained during their migration path manage to (re)construct their lives, to carry out actions of resistance and negotiation, within a system that keeps organizing, controlling and filtering them through various forms of bordering practices.

2. On the field, at the borders: methodological note and positionality

At the basis of the present article is the ethnographic research I undertook in 2021 to study and analyze the condition of migrants along the Balkan Routes with a temporal perspective. This particular choice was made following several previous experiences I had working in support of migrants in Italy and in some countries along the Balkan routes, and was framed during and after years when rhythms and temporalities of the Western world were profoundly shaken by the pandemic, showing how the perception of time can deeply change with respect to the condition of life in which one finds oneself.

The fieldwork was structured between July 2021 and December 2021, mainly in the city of Bihać in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Patras and Corinth in Greece. To capture the interconnectedness of these locations and delve into the narratives of the people I encountered, I employed a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995), that gave me the opportunity to grasp and reflect on the different aspects and connections these places have as essential parts of the routes that are crossed in the Balkan regions. As essential as the multi-sited ethnography research was also my involvement, throughout the whole fieldwork period, with some NGOs and grassroots organizations working in support of refugees and people-on-the-move in Greece and in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This highly engaged, participatory role allowed me to have access to certain situations and easily establish relationships of trust with the different actors present there. Although I placed myself in a critical position with respect to my positionality and my dual role, I noticed how, in most cases, my position as a volunteer/activist always emerged more strongly, both in the eyes of those involved and in the actual day-to-day actions. Thanks to the choice of volunteering, while also researching, in a role as both observer and actor, I was able to create and legitimize a reciprocal and mutual dynamic with all the actors involved and the subjects of the research, while also trying to “redefine the relationship between researchers and the participants in a non-hierarchical manner” (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Specifically, my collaboration, in both Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina, was with some grassroots organizations that have been active for years in supporting people on the move, along the Balkan routes: I volunteered with One Bridge to Idomeni, that run community centers in the cities of Corinth and Athens in Greece and in Bihać in Bosnia-Herzegovina; and with No Name Kitchen, active in informal transit camps in the city of Patras in Greece, and in Bihać and Velika Kladuša in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The intensive engagement as a volunteer/activist in the analyzed contexts also helped me understand the practices, languages, and forms of interaction used, and gave me the tools to better deal with the possible shocks

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that newcomers might experience when being in contact with difficult and dramatic physical and social conditions.

As result of my highly involved role, questions of positionality, power, and privilege, as well as attachment and bias, were matters of ongoing concern and reflection. The role of volunteer/activist-researcher, the position as an insider/outsider to many situations and as an educated female with the possibility to leave the context at any time affected all the interactions and relations, as well as the material collected and discussed. Not only, the ease of my movement across borders and countries, in stark contrast to the condition of stillness and forced immobility experienced by the subjects of my research, fostered a critical and reflexive perspective on my work, both in the sphere of research and in that of social intervention in these situations. Always keeping in mind my privileged position, trying not to be invasive during chats and interactions, respecting the timing and mode of interaction of others, without imposing my point of view, remaining open to perspectives, unexpected events and downtime, were some of the strategies I activated to manage my specific position.

Furthermore, as a volunteer, I was not only physically present but also socially and emotionally accessible for frequent and informal interactions. Volunteering in this setting required active involvement and participation within the informal transit camp or the community centers, establishing a recognized and respected role that is distinguished from the less-welcome, unproductive visitors, such as journalists or researchers not otherwise involved in the practices and dynamics of the context. As scholars have noted, establishing a participatory role, “culturally definable” within a research community helps to build relations, also by eliminating the “stigma associated with an outsider’s status” (Johnson et al., 2006.), also granting the researcher unique insights into the community’s “unwritten rules and complex interactions” (McMorran, 2012). This perspective, in fact, offered me the possibility to gather data while challenging hegemonic ideologies and to have privileged access to the context explored. Of course, in parallel, one of the main challenges was to remain attentive to the so-called “activist blinders” and to the possible bias, linked to personal experiences and relations, affecting the research (Jordan & Moser, 2020).

As for the techniques used for the research, I mainly relied on participant observation (Semi, 2010), on a constant use of field diary and on free or semi-structured interviews (La Mendola, 2009), conducted both with actors involved in the associations and organizations present, and with migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, living/in transit in Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Specifically, during the five months of fieldwork I conducted 19 in-depth interviews, 11 with activists, volunteers and association workers and 8 with migrants stuck in the

selected contexts. In addition to these, valuable ethnographic data is represented by the numerous chats, oral and written conversations that took place informally, during voluntary work and in the everyday life of both contexts. These conversations were all noted down and are contained in the field diary, which was also an essential part of the empirical material analyzed. Especially in the exchanges with the migrant subjects, this mode of communication was often more effective and allowed narratives and stories to flow more naturally and sincerely.

All the collected testimonies have been considered and returned in their entirety, without translations, corrections, or embellishments, preserving all linguistic imperfections. The choice to maintain the grammatical and expressive errors stems from the desire to preserve the intentionality, communicative power, and incisiveness of the original versions, which could be lost through correction. All the interviews were held in English, since all of the interviewees were English speakers, with different levels of knowledge, fluidity and familiarity. The rare communication gaps were bridged through the use of computer translation systems, which are often used in these contexts by the various actors involved.

Finally, I paid special attention to the process of writing and restitution, focusing especially on the experiences and narratives collected, with the aim to produce counter-narratives that challenge the dominant discourses concerning migrants stranded along the Balkan routes. In a landscape where discourses, practices and actions are constructed following a merely humanitarian/securitarian perspective, the research intended to put subjectivities at the center, to investigate the relations between power structures and practices of self-modeling and to return the strategies of negotiation and resistance created and developed.

3. Borders, mobility and temporalities: a theoretical framework

The literature considered for the development of the research and this specific article is oriented toward different disciplines. As analytical lenses, I applied the theories mainly referred to critical border studies, theories on mobility, on time and temporality and on subjectivity. Recent studies on borders are mainly based on the assumption that borders and frontiers should be considered not only as physical lines that mark the territory of a State, but also as technologies of control used to govern, classify and regulate populations. In particular, through the studies of Balibar (2009), Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), Papadopoulos et al. (2008), Yuval-Davis (2018) and De Genova (2013, 2017), it's possible to see how the proliferation of borders and their empowerment,

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acted out through practices of militarisation, externalization and securitisation, are to be read as foundational and fundamental mechanisms of neoliberal globalization and as systems of governance over the mobility of people. On the other hand, many scholars have also shown (Brambilla & Jones, 2020; Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018), that the border can - and should - be considered not only as a device that produces violence and inequality, but also as a generative space, where numerous practices and struggles can rise in the attempt to deconstruct the structures made to control and subjugate people (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Ambrosini, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2018). As underlined by different studies, “the multi-vocal, mutually constitutive, shifting and contested meanings of contemporary bordering processes” should be constantly addressed (Novak, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2013) in order to explore borders as arenas where various tensions arise among hegemonic, non-hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic beliefs and actions (Gaibazzi, 2017).

Another strand of studies from which I have drawn useful reflections was the one related to the so-called “mobility studies”, essential to observe and understand in depth the dynamics at work along the Balkan routes. Researches and studies by Salazar and Schiller (2014), Della Puppa and Sanò (2021), Malkki (1992) and Fontanari (2018) allowed me to frame the conditions of stranded people in Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina and the role of state powers in defining, conditioning and classifying different modes and forms of mobility. Mobility and immobility are in fact two analytical categories that should not be understood as binary and exclusive, but rather as deeply connected and intersecting with each other; the form and value they take depend strongly on the migration policies in place, but also on the biographical and geographical trajectories of the migrants, their wishes and desires.

In order to approach the complexity of the situations taken into consideration, it was also essential to adopt the analytical lens of “subjectivity”, as elaborated by Butler (1997), which allows a deeper understanding of power dynamics from the perspective of the people directly involved in them. Indeed, theories of subjectivity provide theoretical tools of analysis that allow to grasp both the power structures exercised by national and supranational powers over people and the practices of self-modeling (Pinelli, 2013) - i.e. how the subjects act and react in the social experiences that limit their actions. Through this perspective, migrant people are looked at and seen as subjects embedded in political, social and economic systems, as individuals with emotions, desires and aspirations, forced in power structures that influence their identities in an ongoing process (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023).

Furthermore, being the focus of this research the importance of temporality in the dynamics, practices and policies that invest the lives of people arriving in Europe, another analytical lens has been the one related to the

theories about time, temporality and migration (Canning et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2020). As Bourdieu (2000) explains, time is an essential tool for measuring and exercising power within society. In contemporary social theory, scholars such as Griffiths et al. (2013), Andersson (2014), Khosravi (2017), and Tazzioli (2016) have deeply examined the temporal dimension in relation to migratory phenomena, demonstrating its value and relevance for an analysis both at the structural level of governance and practices of control, and with respect to individual experiences and subjectivities involved. References will therefore be made to the analysis of the so-called “temporal borders” as techniques for restricting and slowing down people’s movements (Tazzioli, 2016; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), to the inquiries on temporality in relation to feelings and experiences of precariousness, uncertainty and deportability (Griffiths, 2013), to studies on waiting (Khosravi, 2014; Hage, 2009) and to insights on migrant subjectivities from the perspective of temporality (Fontanari, 2018).

Finally, the scenario investigated can also reveal the negotiation strategies created, the acts of subversion and resistance produced, in order to challenge the prevailing power relations. The concept of “agency in waiting” (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022) can describe the situation where migrants, while forced in situation of immobility and stuntedness with structural barriers and limited possibilities of actions, utilize micro-level tactics (Rotter, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2019; Hall et al., 2022) to exercise control over their circumstances. To analyze these circumstances, it was necessary to take into account the studies and reflections of Bloch (1996), Hage (2003) and Khosravi (2017) on hope as a social and political category, produced and distributed unequally by national and supranational powers, but also as a generator and expression of agency, especially in relations to situations of mobility and immobility. Furthermore the analyses of Scott (1985) on the so-called “everyday practices of resistance” embedded in the formation and consolidation of relationships, ties and forms of community, were also essential in order to grasp the different strategies of negotiation.

4. Waiting and (im)mobility at the EU borders

As already mentioned, at the center of this study were Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina, two extremely different but highly representative countries. Despite being two places with profoundly different histories, policies and cultures, they represent two emblematic junctions of the Balkan routes, especially for the function of “bottleneck” they have been taken over the years. For different reasons, in fact, they become places where people, trying to reach Europe, remain stuck, trapped, for indefinite periods of time. In these

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paradigmatic territories practices of control, subjugation and precarisation are experimented to the detriment of those in transit, in order to produce, “from ungovernable flows, governable mobile subjects” (Panagiotidis & Tsianos, 2007).

I considered these two contexts, due to the similar challenging living conditions people face and because of my prior involvement in migrant support organizations active here. The volunteer work in both settings proved indispensable for comprehending the commonalities and disparities in prevailing conditions and practices. Although these two locations possess distinct characteristics, they share a profound interconnectedness, particularly evident in the solidarity practices and dynamics among the involved individuals and groups. Numerous grassroots organizations along the Balkan migration routes, spanning from Greece to Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and beyond, frequently collaborate and form a well-established network of volunteers and activists. They collectively track the movements of people crossing these regions and coordinate their efforts to provide support.

4.1 Greece and the “temporal borders” of asylum

In order to fully understand the dynamics developed at a socio-political level in Greece since 2015, with regards to the migration phenomenon, it is necessary to reiterate the transit role that this country plays in the migratory trajectories of those entering the country. Greece is one of the initial hubs of the Balkan routes that people take to arrive in the European Union and is rarely considered as a country of arrival, also due to its numerous socio-economic problems. “*Greece is not Europe!*” is one of the phrases one can hear more often by people who have been stranded in this country for years. For many of them, in fact, Greece is only a “passage”, a place to leave, not a place to arrive. This transitional character is not only linked to the will and desires of the emigrants, but is also inherent and reproduced in a series of different devices: in European migration policies, in national bureaucracies, in the largely flawed asylum system, in the structural difficulties of access to the domestic labor market and in the processes of continuous legalization of people. All these different types of “borders” continuously force people to remain in a “precarious transit zone” (Hess, 2012), as “immanent outsiders” (McNevin, 2006) - neither completely included nor completely excluded from the spaces of citizenship (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

One of the devices determining these dynamics of inclusion/exclusion is the asylum system, which in Greece is the only channel for foreigners to access a legally recognised permanence. The current asylum system in Greece is

essentially based on two laws, one passed in 2016 by the government led by Alexis Tsipras and outlined on the basis of the EU-Turkey agreement (Law 4375/2016) and the other enacted by the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis (Law 4636/2019 with the recent amendment and with Law 4686/2020). As denounced by UNHCR and civil society organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, this latest legislation has further intensified coercive measures against refugees and asylum seekers, weakened procedural guarantees in the area of reception and asylum applications, and severely limited the scope of action of NGOs and organizations, criminalizing their work and preventing their access to camps and reception programmes. The vagueness and arbitrariness that characterize the various articles of the law seem to serve as the legal backdrop to a system-apartheid increasingly systematized in its operational practices.

During the research period, I focused on two specific contexts in mainland Greece, namely the cities of Corinth and Patras, places where some of the organizations I worked with were and are operating. These two realities represent two aspects of the condition of mobility and immobility of migrants in Greece. On the one hand, people stranded in Patras experience a situation of circular and fragmented hypermobility, in a continuous loop of attempts and failures trying to cross “illegally” the border - embarking on the ferries that are leaving Greece to reach Italy - and continue their migratory project. This hypermobility is deeply controlled and conditioned by the actions of the border police, who continuously intervene to prevent their crossings, and by the extremely precarious living conditions resulting from the informality of the situation. On the other hand, people trapped in the camps and reception facilities, in Corinth, as in the whole country, also experience a condition of subjugation: their lives depend on state power, legislation and an inadequate and fallacious bureaucratic apparatus, which continually produces devices of control and exclusion. From the different interviews I managed to carry out on the field, with volunteers of different organizations and with migrants living in these two places, it emerges clearly the condition of immobility and waiting that characterize the life of people trapped in Greece. While talking to L., a volunteer (male, 26 y.o., from Italy) with whom I shared lots of moments during my time in the community center in Corinth, the frustration about the progressive worsening of the situation emerged clearly and unequivocally.

“Every year is worse. Since I began working in Greece I saw how policies and laws have become more and more oppressive towards refugees and people who are helping them... and it seems like this tendency has no end. (...) They are exhausting everyone who’s here, by closing them in the latest camp, by making them wait for years and years, by stopping programs

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of support like Filoxenia, by stopping the cash card...” (interview to L.,
volunteer in Corinth)

Parallely, the testimonies of asylum seekers I interviewed show clearly the deprivation of time that occurs and the “temporal borders” (Tazzioli, 2016) they have to face. As it appears clearly in the two extracts below, the words of D., an asylum seeker (male, 35 y.o., from Cameroon) stuck in Greece with whom I had the chance to chat and discuss several times while drinking tea and playing card at the community center of Corinth, define precisely the differentiations and boundaries that emerge, as well as the incisive action of the temporal structures that inexorably condition and control their lives.

“It’s like, there is ... a line. Us and them. We, people living in the camp, the refugees, and them, the greeks, the institutions. And the difference is that we are unable to live a normal life. We can’t have stability. Rights. We don’t own our time. We can’t imagine a future for our children.” (interview with D., asylum seeker forced in Greece for 1 year and 6 months)

“Since my arrival in Greece I have to deal with procedures and deadlines. All these procedures and timings to respect. For the asylum request, for the food, for the accomodation, for everything. Sometimes it’s difficult to understand... very difficult... and many people get lost and miss appointments and then it’s even more difficult for them.... So we have to respect many deadlines... so many deadlines... unless we can’t go on....” (interview with D., asylum seeker forced in Greece for 1 year and 6 months)

A general indefiniteness surrounds the fate of asylum seekers, - but also of recognised refugees and of people on the move, illegalized and marginalized by the existing migration policies - creating a sense of uncertainty and precariousness that ends up characterizing any aspect of life and the ongoing process. As I was able to observe and hear from the different testimonies, the indefinite and imprecise nature of the timelines associated with the procedures and bureaucracy inherent in the asylum system seems to perfectly fit into the set of practices and policies designed to regulate the speed of migratory movements of people. Postponements, cancellations, and closures therefore appear here as devices aimed at slowing down and controlling their mobility, as well as governing their movements, impulses, and wills.

4.2 Living the limbo of Bosnia-Herzegovina

With regards to the other case study analyzed and studied for the present article, the attention should be brought to the events and dynamics that happened after 2018, when Bosnia and Herzegovina became a new hub of the Balkan routes. In these territories, the EU has put in place those migration control mechanisms, which characterize a “structurally hybrid regime” (Mezzadra, 2006), arranged not so much to stop the mobility of people as to govern and control it. In the face of the “crisis” arising from the ever-increasing arrival of people in transit on Bosnian-Herzegovinian territory, the existing political order - based on a tripartite government, divided into local administrations - proved to be unsustainable and made impossible any kind of coherent and unified political decision. As a result, the concentration of people condensed into a single territory, in the Una-Sana canton - specifically in the towns of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, - close to the border with the EU, in the north-western part of the country. Over the years, this place has become the nerve center of this new route, forming the base from which to attempt to penetrate the Croatian territory and to walk approximately 240 kilometers to the Italian or Austrian border, and then possibly to other countries.

Therefore, the canton of Una-Sana has been since 2018 one of the main transit points for people trying to enter Europe from Greece and other places on the Balkan routes (RiVolti ai Balcani, 2021b). Due to the fortification of borders, implemented mainly through the increasingly normalized use of illegal *refoulement* practices, and because of both national and European migration policies, thousands of people remain constantly stranded there, locked inside the few and inefficient official facilities or living in informality. Those who are excluded from the reception facilities or choose to remain outside of them find themselves living in abandoned buildings or in the woods, in the so-called “jungles”, scattered in areas adjacent to the border with Croatia, strategic places to stop and recover between repeated crossing attempts. These “counter-camps” (Queirolo Palmas & Rahola, 2020) are continually stigmatized as a threat, as a synonymous with illegality and abusiveness, danger and safety. Evictions of squats and jungles, aimed at bringing people into reception facilities, have in fact become over the years increasingly systematized, a frequent procedure throughout the canton, as denounced by several organizations (RiVolti Ai Balcani, 2021). In addition, as it emerged from various interviews, the asylum system of the country is completely absent and/or ineffective. Similar to the situation encountered in Greece, in the intentions of refugees and asylum seekers, the Balkan countries - and in this case Bosnia-Herzegovina - are only places of passage, stages to reach Europe. However this transit aspect is also caused by the total inaccessibility to asylum procedures:

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according to data provided by UNHCR, in recent years high numbers of people had expressed the intention to seek asylum in the countries of South-Eastern Europe, but the actual formalization of the application has concerned only few cases. In Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular in 2020, out of 14,432 expressions of willingness to seek asylum, only 244 proceedings were actually initiated (RiVolti ai Balcani, 2021, 2021b).

This combination of different circumstances has caused and causes situations of immobility and “stuckedness” (Hage, 2009), that continuously affect the lives of those who want to arrive in Europe. During the months spent in these territories and thanks to the interactions I had, I had the chance to observe how also in this context the deprivation of time through forced waitings and immobility is persistent and widespread. Many of the testimonies collected clearly illustrate this situation, as also S., an activist (female, 36 y.o., from Italy) working in a NGO in Bihać, openly told me:

“People are stuck here because of these European border management policies. They’ve been stuck in the Balkans for years, in some cases... They can’t move forward, they can’t cross Croatian and Slovenian territory, but they can’t go back either. And so they remain stuck in a wait that has no precise contours, no definite time frame. It will end when they succeed in the game, when they reach Europe...” (interview with S., volunteer and activist in Bihać)

Most of the people in transit through Bosnia-Herzegovina live in a constant attempt - the so-called “game” - to cross the border into Croatia and then enter Slovenia, Italy or other countries in the Schengen area. But, because of the frequent and violent pushbacks carried out by the Croatian police and due to structural and environmental difficulties of the route, many of them remain trapped for months, if not years, in these territories, experiencing continuous processes of precarisation and a sense of total uncertainty.

5. “Stuck, but not immobile”: migrants’ negotiation strategies and practices of resistance

As we have seen so far, temporality plays an extremely important role in defining and shaping the trajectories and lives of migrants. By means of “temporal borders” and other different forms of control “over time and through time” (Tazzioli, 2018), for years state powers have harnessed and contained the movements of people arriving in Europe, causing different forms of immobility, waiting and suspension. As emerged in the research, especially

during the fieldwork period, the consequences of such conditions are visible both in the practices of precarisation acted by state powers and in the trajectories and plans of the people involved. However, where there are conditions of extreme marginality and exclusion, strategies and tactics capable of opening up new interstices and spaces of possibility can also develop (Butler, 1997). Thanks to the concept of subjectivity (Butler, 1997; Pinelli, 2013), I gained insight into both the ways power dynamics influence individuals aspiring to reach Europe and how migrants adeptly navigate and assert their agency within a system designed to regulate and oversee them. According to the scholar and researcher Khosravi, waiting and precarious situations should not be seen as a symbol of a condition of passivity. On the contrary, they can represent spaces where different negotiation strategies can emerge and develop, where subversive movements might take place, producing, in opposition to the reactive force of discipline, an extraordinary and essentially political intensity (Queirolo Palmas & Rahola, 2020). Using such a perspective, new spaces of possibility are thus noted in the experiences of migrants, who need to be considered not as invisible and depoliticised victims, but as subjects endowed with agency, resistance and will.

The fragmented and multidirectional configuration of routes towards the European Union can be read as a consequence of a form of governance of mobility that acts “through mobility” (Tazzioli, 2019), that restrains, blocks, slows down and, above all, hijacks movements. As described in the previous section, these routes, in permanent decomposition and recomposition, owe their heterogeneous and transformative nature to the border regime and European migration policies of recent years. However, they are also deeply connected to individual practices that exceed and seek to subvert, even implicitly, the devices of the migration governance and the consequences arising from them. Although studies (Fontanari, 2018) have shown how the hypermobility and the fragmented journeys of migrants are often cause of additional uncertainty and vulnerability, during my research I noticed how the ungovernable, multidirectional and ever-changing movements of people arriving in Europe can also be seen as expressions of agency, as reactions to forced waitings and time suspensions, as attempts to regain control over one’s own fate, in contrast to what has been decided and imposed by state powers.

During the months of research along the Balkan routes, in Greece but especially in the Una-Sana canton (BiH), I observed how these forms of oppositional mobility challenge daily the European borderlands (Queirolo Palmas & Rahola, 2020). This scenario emerged from the words of the people I interviewed, from the observations noted in the ethnographic diary and from the numerous testimonies of activists and volunteers present in the territories. Both when I was in Patras (Greece) and Bihać, while speaking with volunteers

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engaged in daily distribution of essential items and also with migrants, the urgency to move, to keep trying, not to stop, not to give up, was evident.

“I was talking to a guy that was here and he tried the game for 1 month here. But he had no success. Now he’s back to Thessaloniki and he wants to try the Balkan route. He is trying everywhere, constantly. And he told me... to keep trying is like to have more chances to make it.” (interview with R. volunteer in Patras, Greece)

I spend some time chatting with them, they tell me they tried the asylum application process but after a few months in the camps they were about to go crazy: “I was losing my mind there. I prefer here, in the jungle, moving around and trying the game. I try here 20 times, also in Serbia. They told me Romania is good now... maybe I’ll go there.” (fieldnotes, Bihać 26/09/2021)

Furthermore, in both contexts, constant attempts to re-appropriate one’s mobility often coincide with the refusal to be confined inside institutional camps, especially considering the situation related to the reception facilities and the asylum system. During the distributions and the activities I was carrying out as volunteer, with the grassroots organizations active in the Una-Sana canton, I shared many moments and informal chats with the people-on-the-move present there and, for example, J. (male, 22 y.o, from Pakistan) confirmed this situation clearly. Also volunteers and social workers active in Bihać told me about the situation:

“I move a lot. Between all games I try... and the pushbacks... I move. If I don’t move I’m scared I’ll go in a camp.” (interview with J., refugee in Bosnia-Erzegovina)

“Many people here, they move a lot, between Una-Sana, Serbia, Sarajevo, all around, because they don’t want to risk to end up in the camps.” (interview with P., social worker and activist in Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina)

Camps in fact represent those detention mechanisms typical of today’s governance of migration, where a “humanity in excess” (Rahola, 2003) is constantly isolated and segregated. But, these spaces are also constantly challenged by the very people who should inhabit them. In the Bosnian context, this contestation takes place with the categorical refusal of many to remain confined and isolated within the official facilities, and with the continuous construction and reconstruction of different and changing “counter-camps” (Queirolo Palmas & Rahola, 2020): informal, temporary places where to take refuge, wait and plan new trajectories. In Greece, on the other hand, it coincides

with the decisions of many people, exhausted by the indefinite temporalities surrounding their fates within the asylum system, to disengage and escape from the bureaucratic meshes that constrain them and to attempt the route through the Balkans or the Adriatic Sea. The different spatial and mobility practices implemented thus become a response to waiting, forced stalemate and containment, both in the Hellenic contexts and in the Balkan countries, where the very changes in direction and routes become symbols of subversion. This emerges clearly in the testimonies collected during the research, especially from the ones with those privileged witnesses that have the chance to observe daily the changing nature of the Balkan routes and of the trajectories of people. R. (female, 27 y.o., from Germany) and P. (female, 24 y.o., from Italy), both volunteers and activists in Bihać, openly explained it:

“One of the reactions to the forced stalemate is certainly the constant change of routes. The routes in the Balkans since 2015 have changed so much. Now there is the Belarus-Poland route that has been talked about so much and is seeing absurd - but already seen - situations at the border. But in the central Balkans we have gone from what was Serbia-Hungary to then Serbia-Croatia, to then Serbia-Bosnia-Croatia. Now there has been a route through Romania for a year. (...) it's a change of routes either because of the cases of violence, to avoid... or change of routes because there are less controls, more possibilities, there are more active taxis in that route than the other.” (interview with R., social worker and activist in Bihać)

“They try, and then it goes wrong, and then they try again and again and again. For weeks, months, even years. And they always tell us: ‘I will keep trying... I will reach Europe someday, inshallah.’” (interview with P., social worker and activist in Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina)

What emerges is the constant search for better, less exhausting, more viable possibilities that challenge the border regime, in order to redefine and control their own trajectories. The proliferation of routes and paths in the Balkan territories is an emblematic example of such attempts: where walls are erected, where borders are militarized and controls keep increasing, people react and try to circumvent obstacles, to find other routes and continue on their trajectories. Their condition as individuals trapped in national and supranational structures is challenged and questioned by a continuous push towards new alternatives and opportunities to cross the border and realize their goals.

In addition, these forms of resilience and agency should also be seen in relation to the violent actions and abuses carried out in the border areas: especially on the Croatian-Bosnian border, where the police violently carries out pushbacks daily, people continue to attempt to enter the Schengen area.

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The determination and tenacity emerged in the testimonies collected demonstrate a generative drive, that appears at times incredible, especially when observed by witnesses like me or volunteers active there, who don't share such migratory background and have a privileged position in such contexts.

“The Croatians can beat, torture, do whatever they want, but they do not give up. And they are people who come back with bruises, dog bites, broken arms, who have everything stolen, every game, every attempt... But they tell themselves: “I try.” Then there is the physical violence... there was a case of boys being spray-marked by Croatians... but they keep telling you: ‘No, they can do what they want to me but I won't give up!’ (interview with R., volunteer in Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina)

When we arrive in the jungle we are met by some Pakistani boys asking for food and some medicine; they tell us they have just been deported from Croatia after a game attempt. They are hungry and desperate, they do not understand why the police continue to treat them not as human beings, but as ‘insects to be driven out, crushed’. One of them says “I know this is illegal crossing, but we are human beings... we don't deserve this”. Despite the violence they have suffered, the constant failures to cross the border, they will attempt the game again as soon as they are able to do so, just like all those stranded in these areas. (fieldnotes, Bihać 20/09/2021)

Although such movements may appear to some as desperate, fragmented and dispersed, the hope generated in such circumstances must be taken into account. For individuals trapped within four walls, a container, or a tent in an institutional camp, this sensation diminishes, fades away, and weakens, compromising the entire migratory experience. Therefore, continuously moving, repeatedly attempting to cross the border, are actions that help mitigate the oppression imposed by stasis and waiting (Hage, 2009). These actions show, on one side, how hope can emerge in situations of stillness (Khosravi, 2017), and on the other side, how movements and mobility hold a particular relevance in relation to aspirations and prospects for the future. As also noted by Robert Rydzewski in his analysis of the mobility of people in transit in Serbia, the movement of migrants at the European borders is closely interconnected and engages with feelings of hope that result necessary to continue the migratory journey. Expectations of a better future indeed become one of the primary catalysts of hypermobility, generating and nourishing the movements of people (Rydzewski, 2020).

Future orientation and the capacity to desire and aspire to a better life are thus crucial dispositions for those who are hindered in their attempts to reach a specific place, enabling them to remain active subjects. This constitutes a

condition of possibility (Butler, 1997) through which the process of self-construction occurs despite the power relationships and impositions that dominate their lives. R., a NGO worker (female, 27 y.o., from Germany) with whom I talked a lot when I was in Bihać, have shortly but effectively described the strength and resistance that emerge and that she was able to grasp:

“I know it’s unbelievable, but so many people say to you: “But I don’t give a damn if they deport me or beat me up. I try, I keep trying constantly, I will get to Europe sooner or later.” That is, they don’t give up. They continue, they resist.” (interview with R., social worker in Bihać)

Despite their political force, these more or less implicitly claimed possibilities of movement should not be romanticized. They come, in fact, at the price of illegality (Picozza, 2017) produced and assigned by state powers: breaking free from the meshes of asylum systems, leaving the structures and reception programmes in which one remains trapped for years, in order to regain a relative autonomy and mobility means in fact abandoning the legal and formal ways set up for the recognition of a legitimate stay; it means to become “freer” but - once again - illegalized and more precarious.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, the analysis and reflections conducted here aim to show and unveil the structures, dynamics and experiences that characterize the lives of those who find themselves stranded and immobilized in their attempts to reach the European Union. Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina are two symbolic places where different techniques of containment, confinement, disciplining and marginalization have been implemented, tested and refined along the years, demonstrating the various ways in which different sovereign powers can overlap, intersect and act to the detriment of migrants. Thanks to the temporal perspective, it was possible to see how the control of others’ time is also outlined as an exercise of power, an act of domination and discipline. In the lives of migrants, a temporality managed from above weighs down transversally, marking their paths, projects and agency.

However, the close analysis of the situations of “stuckedness” (Hage, 2009) and waiting, which was made possible thanks to my fieldwork, allowed me to identify and grasp also the various and different negotiation strategies implemented in response to the mechanisms of control and containment. Observing these dynamics made it possible to take a distance from stigmatized

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visions that portray refugees, asylum seekers and migrants as victims, as weak subjects to be pitied, invisible and depoliticised, without any agency.

Looking at the border as a place of struggle and at the waiting spaces as places where actions and reactions can develop, I have therefore tried to examine and show the increasingly heterogeneous and transversal tendencies of opposition to national and supranational power assemblages. It appears clear from the ethnographic material collected and the experiences and stories reported that the “margin” - the marginalized and marginalising areas - can also be a space for the creation, sharing and elaboration of strategies, a “site of resistance” (hooks, 1989). Where borders, blockades, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion arise and are reinforced, more or less stable, more or less conscious opportunities for rupture and opposition, subversion and self-determination are also created.

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